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Is there a 'booze n' blades culture' in Scotland? Evidence from Young Offenders

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Disclaimer

The content and comments herein are those of the authors and not the views of the Scottish Prison Service.

Introduction

In recent years youth knife-crime, and related 'gang' membership, has become an issue of increased policy relevance across the UK (Eades et al, 2007; Lemos & Crane, 2004; Maxwell et al, 2007; Squires, 2009). In Scotland these issues are more long-standing than elsewhere in Britain, with such concerns dating back for at least a century (Davies, 1998 & 2007; *Daily Record*, 1972; Forbes & Meehan, 1982; Fraser A, 2005; ISTD, 1968; Jeffery, 2002; McArthur & Kingsley-Long, 1957; Patrick, 1973, *Scotsman*, 1916, 1928, 1936 & 1950; Stillitoe, 1955). Although these issues had been receiving less media attention in recent decades (arguably having being replaced by concerns over illicit drug use), since the turn of the millennium what has been dubbed Scotland's "booze n' blades' culture" has once again become headline news (Christian, 2005; Curtis & McLeod, 2003; *Daily Record*, 2007; Fraser D, 2005; Leyland, 2006; Lynch & Black, 2008; MacAskill, 2009; McKay, 2004; MacLeod, 2005; Nicholson, 2007). For example, Scotland (especially Glasgow city) has variously been described as the 'knife-crime capital of the UK', the 'murder capital of Western Europe' and the 'most violent country in the Developed World' (Canadian Broadcast News, 2006; Fracassini, 2005; Kelbie, 2003; Kesteren et al, 2000; Martin, 2004; Paisley 2005; Tweedie, 2005; Welsh, 2005), labels largely resulting from the resilience of this pattern of alcohol, gangs and knives.

Despite being such a long-standing issue in Scotland and one now equally high profile elsewhere in the UK, there remains a dearth of research into why young adult males become involved in alcohol-related knife-crime. This paper will assess the extent of alcohol-related weapons use in Scotland's Young Offender population and examine how these issues are linked in this high risk group.

Methods

The research for this paper was carried-out as part of an ongoing study into the role of alcohol in young men's offending. It was conducted inside Scotland's only male Young Offenders Institution (YOI), which takes into custody all those aged between 16 and 21 years from across the whole country. At the time of the research the YOI's population varied between 600 and 700 prisoners.

Self-completion survey

The initial phase of the research was a self-complete survey conducted in 2007. This comprised a short questionnaire on various aspects of Young Offenders' drinking behaviours and built upon similar surveys using the same methodology conducted in 1979 and 1996. The 2007 questionnaire differed from the previous survey in that it contained some additional items on weapon use and gang membership while in the community. Specifically the following questions:

- Have you ever carried a weapon? [Yes/No]
- Which weapons have you carried? [open-ended]
- Have you ever used a weapon? [Yes/No]
- Which weapons have you used? [open-ended]
- Have you ever used a weapon to injure somebody? [Yes/No]
- If 'yes', were you under the influence of alcohol and/or other drugs of any kind when you used the weapon? [Yes/No]
- Which ones? [open-ended]
- Have you ever been in a gang? [Yes/No]

The survey recruited Young Offenders during their induction into the YOI. This involved a prison officer giving out the questionnaire to potential respondents at this time and then collecting it when completed. Thus recruitment was by convenience sampling (in a quasi-random fashion) depending on who (i.e. which offender) was being inducted into the institution at the time of the study (Spring-Summer 2007). Recruitment continued until the numbers involved in the previous sample (conducted in 1996, $n = 154$) had been reached (i.e. exceeded) when the recruiting officer was instructed to stop. The number of rejected / non-filled-in questionnaires given out in was seven, leaving a total of 172 for analysis. Thus the sample represents between one quarter and one third of Scotland's total male Young Offender population at the time.

Questionnaires were anonymous and participants were informed that they did not need to answer any question which they did not wish to. This self-completion questionnaire method has a number of disadvantages, including the inability of the researcher to prompt and probe for more detailed answers and the potential for incomplete data or poor quality responses. As might be expected the survey suffered from some missed answers or vague responses to open-ended questions. Few questions were answered by every respondent, though it should be stressed that much of this 'missing data' was generated either because the question concerned was not relevant (e.g. some offenders did not drink alcohol) or because respondents did not know the answer (e.g. they could not remember). Thus the base for the percentages reported in this paper is seldom the full 172 Young Offenders who responded to the survey.

Despite this limitation, the findings of the survey appeared particularly concerning and in need of a more detailed investigation. In order to confirm (triangulate) the patterns

indicated by these self-complete questionnaires and to provide more detailed explanation, qualitative interviews were carried-out with a further 30 Young Offenders in 2008.

Face-to-face interviews

To be compatible with the quantitative survey, interview participants were also recruited by convenience sampling within the YOI during induction. This time the prison staff who were on duty in the induction hall invited the Young Offenders present to participate in the research and introduced them to the university interviewer.

All interviews were conducted in private, within an interview room, which while out of hearing range of prison staff had a glass frontage, and the interviewer was given a security alarm. As well as being provided with a consent form and an information sheet, potential interviewees were verbally assured of the study's voluntary nature plus the rules of confidentiality by the interviewer, and that they were free to terminate the interview at any time. No Young Offender refused to take part or withdraw, although one appeared agitated and keen to return to his friends and so he was not interviewed.

The interviews asked the 30 Young Offenders who participated in this phase of the research about their patterns of substance use and offending behaviours while they were in the community. All interviews were taped and later transcribed by the interviewer. These interviews gave Young Offenders the opportunity to describe in their own words their experiences. To this end illustrative quotes are provided here (with pseudonyms, ages and current offences). Combining these two methods provided insight into the role that alcohol can play in facilitating the use of bladed weapons to injure someone.

Results

Survey Findings

The survey participants had a mean age of 18.5 years (base =171). Most (90.6%, base = 171) stated that they had drunk alcohol while in the community. There were also high levels of reported cigarette smoking (77.4%, base = 146) and illegal drug use, particularly cannabis (85.4%, base = 157).

When their current offences were examined (i.e. the reason respondents were inside the YOI at the time of the survey), just over half (53.4%, base = 163) reported that they were currently in custody for a serious violent crime (i.e. 'Group 1 Crime') such as homicide, armed robbery or serious assault (e.g. 'occasioning permanent impairment', 'disfigurement' or 'danger to life'). Indeed, when other forms of violence are considered (i.e. non-serious assaults or weapon possession) nearly three-quarters (73.0%) of the sample were currently imprisoned for a violent act. Only one in ten (11.0%) were in custody for a crime of dishonesty (i.e. 'Group 3' Crimes). This pattern of offences was the reverse to that found in the previous survey, conducted in 1996, when only one in ten (10.0%, base = 130) were in custody for a serious violent crime, but a third (33.8%) were in custody for dishonesty. Whether these figures are reflective of wider patterns of offending in the community, or not, cannot be known from this research. However it does indicate that the current sample comprised a high proportion of violent individuals.

Respondents were asked whether they believed alcohol, and/or illegal drugs, was to "blame" for their current offence. In the 2007 survey, a majority of drinkers blamed alcohol (56.8%, base = 140). In contrast under one third of drug users blamed any illegal drug (30.1%, base = 153) either alone or, as was more often the case, in combination with

alcohol. A majority of drug users, who also drank, blamed alcohol for their current offence (56.7%, base = 120). The most often blamed drug was diazepam ($n = 24$ respondents, compared with only 10 who blamed heroin). Again the current cohort differed from the previous 1996 sample, in which drinkers and drug users were equally likely to blame their offence on their substance use (40.0% and 40.1%, bases 140 and 142, respectively). Whether these attributions represent post hoc excuses (i.e. 'deviance disavowal') or highlight genuine beliefs about how these offenders felt they were affected by their substance use cannot be fully gauged in this survey, however what this does demonstrate is the salience of alcohol issues in the current sample.

A majority of respondents indicated that they had carried a weapon while in the community (63.8%, base = 152). A similar majority indicated that had used a weapon (62.7%, base = 153). However, despite these similar percentages, carriers were not a subset of users. As might be expected most users were also carriers (79.2%, chi-square = 31.032, $p = 0.000$), but there were also 18 supposed never-carriers who stated that they had used a weapon. Thus other types of involvement with weapons are implied, requiring a more qualitative investigation, such as weapon 'owning' (i.e. keeping a designated weapon at home, but not carrying it) and weapon 'improvisation' for immediate use.

Interestingly, the proportion of respondents who stated that they had been in a gang while in the community (65.7%, base = 137) was very similar to those reporting involvement with weapons. Indeed a strong statistical relationship was found between carrying a weapon and gang membership with 77.3% of those answering both questions having engaged in both behaviours (chi-square = 16.274, $p = 0.000$). Although there was also a significant relationship between gang membership and weapon use, both behaviours engaged in by

70.8% respondents, this finding was less robust (chi-square = 5.667, $p = 0.017$), perhaps indicating that weapon carrying is more of a feature of gangs than actual weapon use. Again the nature of 'gang' cannot be gauged here, but these figures do imply a link between group disorder and involvement with weapons.

As is summarised by Table 1, respondents indicated that they had used a wide variety of weapons, not just "knives" but other bladed and non-bladed items. As might be expected the verbatim response "knife" was the most popular answer, much more so than say "gun", involvement with which was rare even amongst this extreme population. The variety of weapons listed in Table 1, in part, explains why 'users' are not necessarily a subset of 'carriers'. For example, a vehicle is not likely to be carried (though the respondent concerned reported that he was also carrying, an iron-bar in his 4x4 vehicle/SUV should his victim, a police officer, have got back to his feet). Some items are clearly designated weapons (e.g. swords or coshes), some may be improvised (e.g. domestic knives or tools), while others were seldom carried but often used (e.g. bottles and bricks) suggesting these objects were predominantly situational in usage.

<Table 1>

The proportion reporting having used a weapon to injure someone was very similar to that reporting any use (62.8%, base = 148), implying that respondents did not interpret the question on use as pertaining to merely carrying or threatening (e.g. in a robbery). When asked whether they had been under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs (or both) when they had used a weapon to injure someone, the most often specified substance was alcohol (80.5%, base = 77). The most often specified illegal drug was diazepam (23.4%).

This is in accordance with their attributions of blame for their current offence. Again, some respondents reported being under the influence of more than one substance, and even among illegal drug users, who had used a weapon to injure someone, alcohol was the most often cited (78.3%, base = 69). These figures do not inform why alcohol, as opposed to say illegal drugs, should be so strongly associated with this form of serious violence, nor how weapons are related to gang membership. However the subsequent interviews involving another 30 Young Offenders allowed these issues to be investigated in detail.

Interviews

The 30 Young Offenders interviewed were very similar to those who participated in the survey, for example 18 (60.0%) were in custody for a 'Group 1 Crime'. Indeed even those who were currently in custody for non-violent offences were able to describe their involvement in both prior incidents of alcohol-related weapon use (often several such events) and in gang-related group disorder. The inadequacy of merely inquiring about knife 'carrying' in surveys or interventions etc. was further borne out by these interviewees' accounts, in which knives were seen as ubiquitous, and other (designated) bladed weapons could be owned but not carried, as is illustrated by the following quotes.

"No I never got tooled up [carried]. I've used it, but I didn't carry stuff like. I've used knives and quite a lot of stuff. You get knives from anywhere. If you're in a house and people want to fight you, you just grab something" ('Eddie', 18 year-old, motorcycle theft)

"I had a machete in the house and I took it out the house. I bought it off someone and walked round the house with it and put it in my room. I never took it out the house when I was sober though." ('Stevie', 19-year old, assault & robbery)

"Why did you want to buy that?" (Interviewer)

"I don't know. It looked smart. Everyone has got knives." ('Stevie')

As implied in the second quote above, some interviewees reported that they only carried knives when they were intoxicated.

“I’d get drunk and go back home and get a knife, but I wouldn’t do it if I was sober know what I mean, you don’t need one, but when you’re drunk and then you think you’ll go up and get one. It’s stupid isn’t it?” (‘Hugh’, 19 year-old, serious assault)

“I got caught with a Kitchen Devil® [domestic knife] in town and I got done [convicted] for serious assaults. I was drunk and I thought I could walk out with a knife and not get caught. I don’t know why, I can’t remember how I got it. I can’t remember how I got it or nothing. I just woke up in hospital and they said you were in here with a knife...” (‘Gordon’, 18 year-old, serious assault)

Similarly those who did carry, whether routinely or otherwise, reported only using a knife while intoxicated. In accordance with the survey results, interviewees made a direct attribution of blame between their intoxication and having used a knife.

“No it [stabbing] wouldn’t have happened, definitely would not have happened. My brother would not have punched him, I would have stopped my brother from hitting the guy, and starting it. I knew the guy, I liked him and he liked me as well but I was full of it [drunk] and then I lost it man, it was right over the top man.” (‘Dougie’, 17 year-old, 2 serious assaults)

“As for the offence, I cannae [cannot] remember, I was that pissed [drunk]... I remember attacking him, but I don’t remember if I had a knife in my hand or not, but I must have had a knife in my hand if he’s ended up with two stab marks and I always had a knife at one point, especially if leaving my area, I would always have one on me because everybody else carried one, and I thought if I’m going to get attacked, and somebody’s got a knife, then I’m no going to stand there with nothing.” (‘Roy’, 19 year-old, attempt murder)

A variation on this theme was that some interviewees, who had used a knife, had been supplied it, during a fight, by others who were carrying. Similarly some interviewees reported fetching or carrying knives for others to use. Again intoxication was seen as a factor in these decision-making processes.

“...one of my pals was fighting this boy, but my pal had him down on the ground and he shouted. He knew I had the knives [five Stanley® carpet-cutters] on me and he shouted ‘give me it’...” (‘Paul’ 20 year-old, possession of knives)

“...we started drinking and I took 10 Valium [diazepam tablets] and I was walking down and this cunt [the victim] started, I must have run away to my house and got three knives and gave one to all ma pals [friends] and I had one... I just thought I’ll go and get knives and I went and got them and then this cunt [the victim] just happened to start on one of ma pals [friends] so I stabbed him” (‘Michael’, 17 year old, serious assault)

As well as weapon involvement more generally, gang membership was a factor which encouraged this culture of knife 'carrier-providers' and 'receiver-users', and which provided a source of deserving victims (as indicated by the dehumanising language used to denote their victims in gang fight stabbings).

"Stabbed a cunt [victim] man... I didn't have a knife man, it was someone else's and I took it off him. I asked him for it cos' we were all gang fighting." ('Elliot', 17 year-old, attempt murder)

"I never had a knife on me, it was with a screwdriver. I got handed it. Ma pals gave us it, my troops [gang]. They would have done it but I shouted 'give me it', 'throw us it'..." ('Dougie', 17 year-old, 2 serious assaults)

Alcohol-related violence was also linked to gang membership more generally, and interviewees spoke of drinking as either a precursor to or as emboldening preparation for gang fighting with weapons.

"Not when you're sober, only when you're drunk. When you're drunk you want to go down to their [rival gang's] area and fight, you get a fight going, folk get hurt... we were at a party, a birthday party and they came and ran up to the door with choppers [bladed weapons] cos' the party was in their scheme [area], but hundreds [lots] of people got stabbed that night but, five or six got stabbed. ('William', 19 year-old, serious assault)

"And then eh we'd go to [name of next area] and there would be hundreds [lots] of boys there and we'd end up fighting. Don't know why we went, it was drink eh? When we were drinking we'd just go 'we'll just go up for a fight'... You don't really care when your full of drink do you? Yes you don't care. You care when you get caught and get stabbed and all the rest of it yes, but you just think 'that'll never happen to me', you think all that don't you?" ('Gordon', 18 year-old, serious assault)

As well as perpetrating knife-crime, interviewees also spoke of times when they had been the victims of this form of violence, particularly during gang fighting. However, as is illustrated by the following accounts (both made by interviewees who had recently been stabbed and hospitalised) this consequence of involvement with knives was not always seen as a deterrent to such behaviours.

“I got caught [during a gang fight] and hit with a ‘tenner shot’ [large blade], hit with a machete, and stabbed with a bottle in the head two or three times. It left a scar there, there and one in the back [points to head]. I got a fractured skull as well... I went back out [gang fighting] as soon as I got my stitches out... Cos’ it’s boring sitting in the house, it’s something to do. It’s like an adrenalin rush when you’re running about with all your pals and all that, that’s what it was yeah.” (‘Gordon’, 18 year-old, serious assault)

“It’s exciting. Maybe other people don’t think so, but its better when people are looking for you. They are looking for you and they are going to seriously going to try and kill you then obviously that’s when their weapons will come out. They will have knives and stuff and that’s when you start doing stuff. Stuff happens eh. I do find it exciting.” (‘Eddie’, 18 year-old, motorcycle theft)

Finally alcohol was also found to be related to knife-crime through the use of bladed weapons in muggings or robberies perpetrated either to obtain funds to continue drinking or to obtain other resources, once intoxicated.

“Ma pal [my friend] had hit him with a bat and I had stabbed him. And the police came about three days later or something and I got lifted [arrested] and that was all for drink. I just went for him cos’ we wanted money for drink. I stabbed him three times, it wasn’t serious stabbing it was like wee pricks and then I stabbed him in the arse once and ma pal hit him with a bat across the head.” (‘Benny’, 18-year-old, serious assault)

“They lifted [arrested] me for having the axe in a shop. I was trying to get fags [cigarettes] out of the shop. I cannae [cannot] remember doing it, the only time I knew what I’d done was when I seen the CCTV when I was up in court. I had the axe [shows how he waved it around] and went like that in the shop... If I hadn’t had a drink I wouldn’t have gone out with an axe... I would have gone for fags anyway but I wouldn’t have taken an axe.” (‘Stevie’, 19-year old, assault & robbery)

Discussion

This research was conducted within Scotland’s male Young Offenders Institution, and therefore the findings reported here are only representative of young adult males in custody for the most serious violent offences. In the general population knives may not be the most commonly used weapon. However, these participants represent the group who do use knives to injure, and at whom interventions against knife-crime should be targeted.

Knife-crime interventions in Scotland have included high-profile police stop-search campaigns, often in conjunction with knife amnesties, (e.g. Strathclyde Police's Operations 'Blade' 1993, 'Spotlight', 1999 and 'Magnet', 2003), which have little long-term effect on numbers of stabbings (Bleetman et al, 1997) and which may further antagonise or alienate at-risk youths (Eades et al, 2007). The licensing of non-domestic knives has also been proposed (Scottish Executive, 2005). No one in this research reported buying a knife from a shop, then using it. Instead the ubiquitous nature of knives was apparent. That many knife users had never carried, and that even those who do carry may not have been carrying when they had used, indicates that stop-search policing will only have a limited impact on such violence. Such searches may even be counterproductive, encouraging a culture of 'carrier-providers' for those willing to be 'receiver-users', thus increasing the total numbers of those involved in knife-crime.

The evidence here also indicates that the problem is not restricted to knives and that the same individuals use a variety of other (often bladed) weapons. It is suggested that the prohibition of designated weapons such as swords (MacDonnell, 2004; Scottish Executive, 2005) may have limited impact because domestic substitutes, such as kitchen-knives or axes, are so readily available for use, both as situational improvised weapons and for purposive carrying in order to commit violent crime (e.g. robbery). Thus the manufacturing of safer kitchenware would seem likely to have some impact (Hern et al, 2005), albeit limited to some situational violence. Finally, there may also be a danger that a focus on knives may encourage the use of other weapons (e.g. bottles or guns).

On the basis of these findings, an alternative (or at least complementary) strategy for tackling knife-crime would be interventions aimed at reducing youth gang activity (Smith &

Bradshaw, 2005) and in particular alcohol harm-reduction. Alcohol consumption was found to be strongly related to this kind of violence throughout this research (much more so than illegal drugs). Heavy episodic drinking among this population appeared to have interfered with their decision making processes during potentially violent encounters, resulting in weapon use, which is more likely to incur a custodial sentence than a fist-fight, and hence respondents blaming alcohol for their imprisonment. This was further evidenced by interviewees who had used a knife but were unable to remember how they obtained this weapon, let alone why they used it. While intoxicated such offenders may also have been more likely to 'get caught', before, during or after a violent incident, and both by the police or rival gangs. This research also supports evidence from Scottish Accident and Emergency rooms which indicate that alcohol consumption by victims, as well as by perpetrators, is a factor in the severity of the knife injuries (Webb et al, 2009).

Conclusion

Although the two are clearly linked, the evidence presented here suggests that it is simplistic to think only of a 'booze and blades culture' among violent offenders in Scotland. Such violence was not restricted to bladed weapons, and even terms such as 'knife-carrying' and 'using' do not fully describe the patterns of weapon involvement found here. The ubiquitous nature of knives (and other bladed implements) suggests that more imaginative and broader policy interventions are needed, either in conjunction with or instead of stop-search and licensing / restricted prohibitions. In particular it is concluded that interventions to address alcohol intoxication and gang culture among young adult males are likely to have a positive impact on knife-crime and similar offences. On the basis of these findings, alcohol intoxication can turn potential weapon owners into actual weapon carriers, and turn weapon carriers into injurious users.

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Table 1: Weapons reported as carried or used

Sharp Instrument	carry	use	Other weapon	carry	use
"Knife"	53	43	"Gun"	3	4
"Sword"	8	8	Other firearm	5	2
"Machete"	6	5	Vehicle	0	1
"Lock-back" knife	14	9	Pole / Post	5	3
Domestic knife	2	2	Cosh / Baton	8	9
Specialised knife	1	3	"Bat"	11	15
Stanley® Blade	0	1	"Baseball bat"	7	10
Meat cleaver	1	1	Other sports item	6	8
"Blade"	3	2	Domestic tools	8	8
Axe / Hatchet	3	2	"Brick"	1	8
Bottle	2	21	Other designated	6	3
Other sharp	5	1	Other improvised	6	9